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CHALLENGES IN PARTICIPATORY PRIMARY STRESS MANAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS IN KNOWLEDGE INTENSIVE SME'S

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Abstract

While knowledge intensive SMEs have recognized the need for change with respect to productivity and wellbeing, and to some extent have access to tools and methods for enabling this, they still lack process competences and are uncertain about how to approach primary stress interventions and initiate relevant change processes. This paper presents the outline of our research and development project on participatory primary stress management interventions in knowledge intensive SMEs, as well as the preliminary results and related implications. The research and development project is conducted in order to develop an operational model which SMEs can use when they want to initiate participatory primary stress management interventions in their company. The development project builds on a process model for participatory primary interventions in larger knowledge intensive companies and the premises behind this model in combination with other theories which have been used successfully in other interventions. The project is only in its initial phases in conducting the intervention, but so far the preliminary results indicate that management support and allocation of resources is vital, that internal facilitators are important drivers of the change process and that easy-to-use tools are requested from the involved company actors. Given that the interventions in the selected companies are conducted successfully we argue that a new organizational capability to address work-related stress in a collective and collaborative manner is developed in the participating companies. With a successfully conducted intervention we mean that the companies have been able to implement their own change proposals in a collective and collaborative process. By developing this organizational capability we expect that the companies would be able to repeat the process with new change proposals. The research builds on observations, participatory action research, interviews and surveys.

1. Introduction

In Denmark knowledge intensive SMEs find themselves in a situation where they experience increasing problems with work-related stress and strain. It is thus considered to be just as important as accidents at the workplace. (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2010)

Industrial service companies dealing with servicing, repairs and maintenance experience that their employees are affected by factors such as high workload, customer handling and communication. Small and medium sized ICT enterprises, in this case IT consulting companies, also face a number of problems regarding the psychosocial working environment. Two Danish studies point at that it is especially high demands at work, poor planning, demanding projects, workload and project management which are the main problems. In both groups they point to problems, which can lead to work-related stress, increased absenteeism and decreased productivity. (Jensen et al. 2003; Nielsen et al. 2010a)

Several tools and models to alleviate the problems are accessible for the SMEs via the unions and other organizations. A common feature of these tools and models is that they support the OHS work and shows how work-related stress and psycho social work environment can be managed and initiate management actions. While SMEs have recognized the need for change and have access to the tools and methods, they still lack process competences and are uncertain about how to approach primary stress interventions and initiate relevant change processes. (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2010; Nielsen et al. 2010a) It is our experience that only few of the SMEs have access to in-house HR consultants who can apply these tools and initiate and facilitate primary stress management interventions. There is thus a need for new knowledge on how SMEs can initiate and implement primary interventions (Kompier & Kristensen 2000; Murphy 1988) and thus address the underlying organizational conditions that can lead to work-related stress. (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2010; Nielsen et al. 2010b; Randall et al. 2007)

A development project was therefore designed with the aim to 1) develop a model for knowledge intensive SMEs which want to initiate and implement preventive interventions in their own company based on participatory approach where existing in-house resources are being used and 2) uncover the requirements of the actors involved as well as the conditions which affect participatory preventive interventions in SMEs. The project runs from September 2011 to August 2013.

The purpose of this paper is to present the preliminary results of four SMEs participation in the development project, which is now halfway in the moment of writing. Based on our first observations, workshops and interviews, we argue that the model (developed so far) clarifies the employees workplace experiences, creates a common understanding of the working conditions creating enthusiasm and stress, explicates tacit knowledge about work-related problems and solutions and develops the organizational capability to initiate primary stress management interventions based on a participatory process.

Based on the data collection from the initial phase we argue that participatory and primary interventions can be initiated without traditional in-house resources in SMEs such as HR with a positive impact on the work processes and well-being.

2. Methodology

Work-related stress and the problems listed are not solely related to SMEs, however, the research and development project was conducted in order to develop an operational model which SMEs can use when they want to initiate participatory primary stress management interventions in their company. The development project builds on a process model for participatory primary interventions in larger knowledge intensive companies (*Knowledge work and stress – Between Enthusiasm and Strain 2006-2009*) and the premises behind this model in combination with other theories which have been used successfully in other interventions (Buch et al. 2009; Ipsen & Jensen 2012; Ipsen et al. 2010; Mogensen et al. 2008; Sørensen & Holman 2010).

The project is an explorative study of four case companies which each conduct a six months intervention process with the aim to develop and implement preventive strategies and changes based on a collective and collaborative process. Thus, this is not a classic change management approach, but a dynamic development process where ideas are created and further developed through collaboration among employees and managers, systems understanding, visualization, testing, repetition and adjustment.

In the effort to identify and recruit the participating companies different strategies have been applied; the researchers' own network, Linked-in, company homepages and company databases. Specifically, four SMEs were selected in Denmark to make up the sample and have agreed to participate actively in the project, two IT-companies and two manufacturing companies ranging from 40 to 170 employees. So far the following project activities have been conducted. First, the project start-up consisted of a series of meetings attended by the researchers and the individual companies where considerations about participation in the project were addressed. When the companies had agreed to the terms and had decided to participate, a project team was formed in each company, consisting of a project manager and two facilitators.

Hereafter, all employers and employees participated in a FishBone workshop at each workplace in order to identify the employees' experiences with enthusiasm and strain in their daily work. The outcome of each FishBone workshop was a prioritized list of working conditions to be changed which forms the basis for the following interventions. The FishBone workshop was followed by a survey questionnaire using an online survey tool. The aim of the survey was to measure the employees' commitment to the process. The survey data was then computed for interpretation.

At the end of the companies' priority process, where two interventions at each workplace were decided upon, relevant actors (project manager, facilitators and three employees chosen randomly at each work place) were interviewed about the usefulness of the tools applied and their experience of the process. Along with primary data, the research team also made use of secondary resources in the form of published articles and literature on participation and primary interventions. In the coming months the four companies will go ahead and implement the changes where everyone is going to participate. The process will be run by and followed closely by the in-house facilitators which have been appointed.

By working with changes over a longer period, there is opportunity for ongoing reflections, improvement and adjustment of these and thereby ensure that the changes embedded in the company and in the daily activities. (Dahler-Larsen 2001; Murphy 1988; Newell 2002) In this process, the persons engaged in the process play an important role in cooperation with the project team. Together they are responsible for driving the process and ensure that the project

goes according to plan. The result of the intervention is a collective process in which a number of preventive strategies and interventions are initiated and implemented.

The research team acts as both model designers and supervisors of the change process. The team follows the process by observing the changes, holding status meetings and interview stakeholders and the in-house facilitators besides conducting four surveys during the whole process. The research team does not participate in corporate daily activities and the implementation of priority interventions. To ensure that a sharp focus is maintained on the project, it is recommended that the companies continually focus on clarifying and make the targets and process visible by visualizing both. (Gray et al. 2010; Rasmussen 2008; Womack et al. 2007) At the end each company intervention will be evaluated using the Chronicle Workshop as the evaluation tool.(Rasmussen 2011)

3. Preliminary results

In this section we present our preliminary results which can be divided into two categories: 1) results concerning the intervention model and process and 2) results concerning company gains from implementing the model.

3.1 Results concerning the intervention model and process

Based on our first workshop observations, surveys and interviews the premises and process model have been accepted and started successfully in all four companies. There has been a readiness to identify the project team including the facilitators as well as allocating time and resources to the various activities. However, the process has run more smoothly in some companies than in others.

Furthermore the facilitators are found important as drivers of the change process. The facilitators are characterized by people who are trusted by their colleagues and who is interested in contributing to the development of their work place. The majority of the appointed facilitators does not have any particular experience in running a development process or interview other people. So it seems like the trust and credibility is more important than the ability to run a process at first hand. However, some of the facilitators draw on personal competences such as being creative or being certified as a coach, others use their experience as being former managers. The personal competences are not necessarily known by their colleagues and managers but become evident during the process.

It is also evident that there is a need for easy-to-use tools which the facilitators and project group can use in monitoring and steering the change process. Specifically interview guides and clear instructions for the different activities have been requested.

3.2 Results concerning company gains from implementing the model

The involved companies have experienced results on three levels: 1) Quick wins, 2) changed daily practices and 3) development of internal process competences.

Quick wins are initiatives or issues that have revealed during the FishBone workshop which have not been voted into the top 5 priorities, but management have found value in doing something about them anyway because they were low hanging fruits. Changed daily practices are the target of the intervention and implementing the model and in some of the companies we can already

now see how the daily practices change with respect to the selected initiatives. With respect to the development of the internal process competences in the companies we can see that the facilitators develop new competences with respect to how to plan and structure a change project as well how to interview colleagues and report about the process at meetings.

4. Discussion, conclusion and implications

Before the participating companies were selected and agreed to participate, the researchers were in contact with many different SMEs. Many of these SMEs found interest in the project model and acknowledged the need for interventions in SMEs. Paradoxically, however, they did not have the resources to enter the project because they had allocated their resources to other change processes at the moment. This indicates that the need for a process tool is apparent and that SMEs lack the internal resources such as a HR function to facilitate a change process.

However, in the participating companies it can be concluded that both managers and employees have succeeded in finding resources which can help facilitate the process - competences which they have been unaware of. Secondly, it is evident that there is a need for easy-to-use tools which the facilitators and project group can use such as an interview guide and clear instructions for the different activities.

In the present development project the researchers act both as model designers and supervisors of the change process which is primarily driven by the project groups in the companies. The researchers have therefore made themselves available for discussions and answering process relevant questions. This indicates that the project group, and indeed the facilitators need some external sparring partners since it can be difficult to find them in-house. Our hypothesis is thus that the facilitators need a network which can support the sustainability of the facilitators' new capability to facilitate participatory primary interventions at the workplace. We picture that such a network could be constituted of facilitators from other companies, but also unions or other branch organizations focusing on supporting wellbeing at workplaces from an organizational point of view rather than having the individual as the target for change.

Given that the interventions in the selected companies are conducted successfully we argue that a new organizational capability to address work-related stress in a collective and collaborative manner is developed in the participating companies. With a successfully conducted intervention we mean that the companies have been able to implement their own change proposals in a collective and collaborative process. By developing this organizational capability we expect that the companies would be able to repeat the process with new change proposals.

The present research challenge is, however, to develop the model to the extent that companies can implement it without the researchers' interference. This is sought to through careful descriptions of the change process, guidance in selecting the qualified internal facilitators and project manager, development of easy-to-use tools, and guidance of where to seek external support (at least in Denmark where the project is conducted).

The outcome of the project is new knowledge on participatory interventions in SMEs and how the process should be designed in order to make it work and an evaluated model to support the intervention and redesign is produced.

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